BUILDING *SISTEMAZIONE* ABROAD: MEANINGS OF HOME IN VENETO MIGRANTS' HOUSES IN BRISBANE

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This study investigates how cultural meanings are produced, negotiated, and materially expressed in the houses built by Italian migrants from the Veneto region who settled in Brisbane, Australia. Using qualitative methods, including in-depth interviews conducted in Australia and Italy and a focus-group discussion in Brisbane, the research explores how migration trajectories, settlement decisions, and everyday domestic practices shape migrants' understandings of "home." Findings show that respondents conceptualize home as both "there" and "here": the hometown in Italy remains a primary symbolic reference, while the current Brisbane house functions as the present locus of dwelling and belonging, making home simultaneously multi-scalar and pluri-local. Earlier Australian dwellings were largely excluded from the category of home and remembered as provisional, instrumental accommodations with limited emotional value. In contrast, the current house was narrated as the definitive material outcome of permanent settlement and interpreted through the culturally resonant concept of sistemazione, linking home to stability, family formation, and secure employment. Respondents also framed the house as the "fruit of toil," condensing decades of intensive labour undertaken within Queensland's expanding economy and reflecting a work ethic shaped by rural and wartime childhoods in Italy. The home further emerged as a site for expressing pride in Italian cultural identity, while also carrying traces of earlier experiences of assimilationist pressure and intolerance. Finally, domestic spaces—especially the living room and kitchen—were central to maintaining family unity, and the house symbolized security both as a robust structure and as an owned asset that provides reassurance in old age. Overall, the findings position migrants' houses as culturally dense artifacts through which settlement, identity, labour, and family relations are materially organized and continually reaffirmed.

INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION Although homes constructed by migrants in Australia carry clear cultural value within a multicultural society, there has been limited direct investigation of how far Italian migrants' cultural meanings are materially expressed in their houses. This study therefore examines the cultural importance and layered, complex meanings that Italian migrants—particularly people from Italy's Veneto region who moved to Australia in the 1950s and 1960s—associate with the homes they built in their new country. Accordingly, the study aims to (1) review scholarship on the meanings migrants attribute to homes in host societies, (2) examine houses built by Italian migrants in Brisbane, Australia, and (3) identify and clarify how cultural meanings may be inscribed in the architectural form of these dwellings.

To frame "home" as a symbolic and meaningful place for older migrants living abroad, the authors draw on theoretical and empirical discussions of home from Europe (Gram-Hanssen and Bech-Danielsen, 2007; Lewin, 2001), the United States (Becker, 2003), and Australia (Baldassar, 2001; Hage, 1997; Levin, 2010; Pulvirenti, 1996, 2000; Supski, 2007; Thompson, 1994, 2005). Gram-Hanssen and Bech-Danielsen (2007) also note that "home" can differ substantially in meaning for refugees—those compelled to leave their country—and migrants—those who relocate by choice. The present research concentrates only on migrants (Faggion and Furlan 2018).

In addition, the category "migrant" can be refined further. Portes et al. (1999:219) describe transnational migrants as individuals whose economic, political, or sociocultural work depends on ongoing, sustained cross-border social ties, typically involving frequent and regular travel (for instance, monthly or several times per year). While the participants in this study do return to Italy, their travel is not sufficiently intensive or economically oriented to align with Portes et al.'s definition; they typically visit primarily for family reunions, around three to four trips over a decade. For this reason, they are better understood not as transnational migrants but as elderly migrants—people who originally migrated mainly for economic reasons and were approximately 80 years old at the time of the research (Baldassar, 2001; Levin, 2010; Pulvirenti, 1996, 2000).

HISTORY AND BACKGROUND

European and American Studies

In European scholarship, Lewin (2001) approached "home" largely as a theoretical construct and argued that studies focusing on older migrants in a host society should treat them as a distinct group because their understandings of home can differ markedly from those of older non-migrants. Lewin emphasized that migrants' meanings of home are shaped by factors such as gender, age, lived experience, and social as well as cultural background. For example, migrant women may conceptualize home differently than migrant men, and older migrants may attach different meanings to home than younger migrants. Lewin further suggested that social background is particularly useful for micro-level analysis, while cultural background helps interpret meanings at the broader macro level (ibid.).

Working in Denmark, Gram-Hanssen and Bech-Danielsen (2007) advanced a similar set of explanatory variables and examined home meanings among three migrant groups—Turks, Iraqis, and Somalis. In their case, Turkish migrants were generally long-settled (often three to four decades), whereas the Iraqi and Somali participants were more recent arrivals as refugees. Their findings indicated that, for many Turkish migrants, feeling "at home" in Denmark was closely tied to family presence: home was understood primarily as the place where one's family is, with proximity to children and grandchildren valued above other considerations.

Comparable themes appear in Becker's (2003) study of older immigrants in northern California, focusing

on Latino, Filipino, and Cambodian groups. Becker highlighted that crowded living arrangements were common and argued that "overcrowding" carried multiple meanings. While participants frequently reported discomfort with congestion, they often continued living this way not only due to limited financial resources but also because such arrangements aligned with cultural norms rooted in their countries of origin, where extended-family households were typical. Where relatives were present in the United States, it was common to find several people sharing a small apartment, with older family members sometimes sharing rooms with grandchildren or sleeping in makeshift spaces within common areas. For those without close kin nearby, friendship networks often substituted for family, leading to shared rooms or shared facilities in basements or boarding-style settings. Although some informants expressed dissatisfaction, many valued these arrangements for the everyday companionship and social interaction they provided—interaction that helped replace the extended-family environment left behind. In this sense, the meaning of home in the host country was strongly anchored in co-residence, family-like ties, and the social life produced through shared living.

Australian Studies

Australian research tends to foreground a different set of meanings than the family-centered emphasis found in some European and North American work (Baldassar, 2001; Hage, 1997; Levin, 2010; Pulvirenti, 1996, 2000; Supski, 2007; Thompson, 1994, 2005). Thompson (1994, 2005), for instance, argued that for Arabic, Greek, and Vietnamese migrant women in Sydney, home can operate as a source of agency within an unfamiliar cultural environment, a means of addressing the emotional costs of migration, and a public marker of achievement. In her account, the domestic sphere becomes a setting where cultural difference can be safely expressed—through language use, interior decoration, and gardens that recall religious and cultural heritage—even when wider social acceptance is uneven despite multicultural ideals (Thompson, 1994). Home also functions as a form of atonement for losses associated with migration (including the loss of a former home and the marginalization of one's culture), while simultaneously symbolizing success achieved through sacrifice and sustained labor in the host country. These interpretations are linked to migration experiences, origin-culture practices, and the degree of recognition afforded by dominant social norms (Furlan, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2016; Furlan and Faggion, 2015a, 2015b, 2016a, 2016b). Importantly, Thompson's findings complicate feminist readings that portray home primarily as a negative or oppressive space (Thompson, 1994, 2005).

Hage (1997), writing about Sydney's Lebanese community, offered a more affective framing, aligning with the idea that home can be understood not only as a place but also as a feeling or mode of being (cf. Hollander, 1991). For Hage, making home involves building four interconnected feelings: security, familiarity, community, and possibility. Security arises in spaces where individuals feel empowered to meet their needs and manage threatening "otherness," producing a sense that the household operates under "our law." Familiarity is created through deep practical knowledge of space—knowing how to move, act, and live within it—and this competence strengthens the sense of security. Community refers to inhabiting a space where people recognize one another as "one's own" and feel reciprocally recognized, grounded in shared symbolic forms, moralities, values, and especially language. Possibility, finally, requires that home remain open to opportunity: it should support the pursuit of a better life, the development of capacities and skills, personal growth, and forms of "advancement," whether social, emotional, symbolic, or economic (Hage, 1997:102–103). Together, these feelings describe how migrants may work to cultivate a stronger sense of being "at home" in Australia.

Building on this framework, Levin (2010) examined Italian and Chinese migrants' understandings of home in Melbourne and argued that each group tended to prioritize one of Hage's four feelings more strongly than the others. For the Italian participants, Levin identified familiarity as especially prominent. She suggested that familiarity was produced through material and visual cues—furniture, paintings, photographs of childhood homes in Italy, collections and ornaments, and even everyday objects such as refrigerator magnets bearing

Italian imagery and symbols. Such items evoke the place of origin and help generate a lived sense of familiarity within Australian domestic space. Levin also argued that differences between groups' home meanings were influenced by factors including ethnic background, the historical and socioeconomic context of migration, age, and class position.

Pulvirenti (1996, 2000) likewise explored meanings attached to home among Italian migrants in Melbourne, focusing particularly on first-generation migrants, many originating from southern Italy, and the significance of homeownership. She described homeownership as carrying multiple, concrete meanings: security (including protection from eviction and a safeguard in situations such as unemployment or widowhood), independence (reducing reliance on others for financial support), privacy (avoiding shared living), autonomy (the ability to renovate without seeking permission), control (freedom to manage the domestic environment), success (pride and satisfaction in achievement), and responsibility (the obligation to maintain and care for the dwelling). Pulvirenti linked these meanings to the Italian concept of sistemazione—settling or establishing oneself—and argued that these migrants left Italy with a strong intention to build a stable future for themselves and their descendants in Australia. In her account, achieving sistemazione in Australia was a moral imperative that shaped their determination to own a house and invest it with the meanings listed above, rather than maintaining a primary orientation toward return (Pulvirenti, 2000). Pulvirenti's interpretation contrasts with Baldassar's (2001) discussion of sistemazione among Italian migrants in Perth, where migration is framed more explicitly as an economic strategy pursued to achieve sistemazione that would ultimately be realized in the homeland.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This section outlines the study's knowledge claims and the qualitative strategies guiding the inquiry. The project examines how migration and the act of constructing a house in Australia shape the meanings attached to "home" among a group of Italian migrants from the Veneto region who are now settled in Brisbane. Veneto was selected deliberately to focus on a single Italian regional cohort rather than Brisbane's broader, pan-Italian population, both because research on this specific community in South East Queensland is limited (Baldassar and Pesman, 2005) and because regionality is a defining feature of Italian life: language, culture, cuisine, social practices, and architectural traditions vary strongly across Italy's twenty regions, each with its own distinctive cultural profile (Mangano in Krase, 2006; Mecca and Iozzi, 2000; Pascoe, 1987).

Data were gathered through one focus-group discussion in Australia and a series of in-depth interviews conducted in both Australia and Italy. These qualitative methods enabled extended, detailed responses and encouraged narrative accounts capable of revealing subtle viewpoints and the cultural meanings that may be expressed through the architectural form of migrants' houses. As Chapman (2005) notes, cultural influences on dwellings are most effectively explored through qualitative research, since the interpretation of what material forms mean within a particular social setting is best accessed through the accounts of the people who inhabit and shape those forms.

The study is explicitly exploratory. Given the small, purposively bounded sample defined by participants' birth years and arrival periods, the aim is to develop hypotheses and generate interpretive insights rather than to test predetermined propositions.

Interviews in Australia were undertaken between January and August 2009 with ten families (twenty individuals) selected using restricted and manageable criteria. All interviewees were Veneto natives, born in Italy between 1920 and 1930, who migrated to Australia during the 1950s and 1960s. Participants were located through Italian national and regional clubs, school associations, and Catholic parishes. Interviews in Italy were conducted between June and September 2010 with five Veneto families (ten individuals) who had never migrated from their home region and who were friends of the Brisbane participants. The Italian interviews

were included primarily as a means of corroborating and contextualizing the information provided in Australia. All interviews took place in participants' homes. Additional material informing the analysis came from a focus group held at the Italian Club in Newmarket, a northern suburb of Brisbane.

All interviews were conducted in Italian. This decision aligns with arguments in the literature (e.g., Cresciani, 2003) that cross-cultural conversations can be complex because cultural meanings and values are conveyed through group-specific symbols, codes, and key expressions that are most fully articulated in a native language. In Australia, interviews began with broad prompts about personal migration histories, relationships with neighborhood and community, and early experiences after arrival. The conversation then moved to a set of more targeted questions organized around three themes: (1) where the participant's house is situated, (2) how the house was planned and constructed, and (3) what the built form means to the participant. Many participants were interviewed more than once to capture fuller life histories; interviewees were keen to share detailed, personal narratives. Interview and focus-group transcripts were subsequently coded according to these three thematic areas.

To deepen interpretation and clarify connections among the emergent themes, the study employed hermeneutic analysis. Findings were then taken back to participants for validation. Armstrong (2000, 2003, 2004) emphasizes that concepts linking place and migration are layered and difficult to extract without careful interpretation, and she therefore used hermeneutic approaches in her own work. Her application of hermeneutic phenomenology informed the analytical strategy adopted here, which draws on a phenomenological mode of interpretation associated with Madison (1988) (Table 1).

Table 1: Criteria used to evaluate the interpretive account (after Madison, 1988; summarized by Plager, 1994).

Criterion	What it requires in this study
Coherence	The interpretation forms a unified account; tensions and contradictions are acknowledged and made intelligible as far as the data allow.
Comprehensiveness	The account keeps the "whole" in view, preserving participants' situatedness and temporality while addressing variation across cases.
Penetration	The interpretation engages and clarifies the central problematic the study seeks to illuminate.
Thoroughness	All guiding questions and relevant strands of the material are examined; no major line of inquiry is left untreated.
Appropriateness	Interpretive questions and emphases arise from the text itself rather than being imposed externally.
Contextuality	Historical and contextual features of participants' accounts are retained, avoiding decontextualized or abstracted claims.
Agreement	The interpretation remains faithful to what the text says, while still indicating where reinterpretation is possible and where prior readings may be limited.
Suggestiveness	The account generates new questions and directions that can stimulate further interpretive work.
Potential	The interpretation is extendable over time, offering insights and possibilities that can remain illuminating beyond the immediate study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section opens with two points of clarification. The first concerns where participants located the idea of "home"—as both "there" and "here." The second addresses how respondents remembered (or, more accurately, did not meaningfully remember) the earlier houses they occupied after arriving in Australia. The discussion then turns to the home as a deliberately constructed material artifact, with particular attention to how cultural meanings are expressed through the built form.

First clarification: Does "home" refer to the hometown or the current house?

During the final interview, when respondents were invited to describe what "home" meant to them, most immediately sought to the question, asking variations of: "Do you mean home as in my town of origin—the place where I grew up—or do you mean this house?" This reaction is revealing because it indicates that, for many migrants, the term "home" is first anchored in the native village, and only secondarily connected to the dwelling in which they currently live. In this sense, home was initially fused with the hometown "there," a place associated with roots and kinship ties that remain active through contemporary communication (Skype, email, telephone, and post). At the same time, home was also understood as "here," namely the Brisbane house that frames everyday life in the present.

These dual associations align with existing scholarship. For Relph (1976), the hometown functions as home because of the deep attachment people often feel to their birthplace and to the remembered landscapes of childhood. From a broader Western historical perspective, Gram-Hanssen and Bech-Danielsen (2007, quoting Moore, 2000) and Burnett (1978) note that, particularly in the nineteenth century, "home" was frequently understood as the country of origin rather than as a private dwelling, and that only later did the domestic house become the dominant referent. In the present study, participants' accounts suggest both a geography and a spatial extension of home. Using the terms proposed by Lucas and Purkayastha (2007), home for this group can be described as *multi-scalar* (at once a town and a house) and *pluri-local* (located in both Italy and Brisbane).

Second clarification: Earlier houses in Australia carried little emotional weight

A further pattern emerged when the interviews moved into the material realm of home. Photographs of the first houses occupied in Australia were largely absent from the family albums shown by respondents. Across all interviewed families, only three photographs of those earlier dwellings appeared, and one of these was incidental, serving merely as a backdrop rather than as a meaningful subject. This absence was striking in itself.

The issue was then raised during the focus-group discussion. When asked directly about the first houses inhabited upon arrival in Australia and what those dwellings might have meant, the question was initially met with silence. Even after rephrasing, responses tended to dismiss the premise: "What would you like to know? Those houses were not ours!" when referring to rentals, or, where a house had been owned, it was described as neither "ideal" nor "final accommodation," but rather as an "economic investment" that was not equated with home. One participant summarized the prevailing view clearly: "Now home is my village and my home in Brisbane," a statement that effectively excludes earlier Australian dwellings from the category of home. Many others expressed the same position in different words.

Taken together—the scarcity of photographs, the silence surrounding the topic, the framing of rentals as not belonging to them, and the portrayal of early owned properties as provisional and purely financial—these cues

were interpreted as evidence of emotional distance from the first dwellings and as an indication that those places carried limited affective significance.

Meanings of home

Many respondents connected their Brisbane houses to the idea of a long-imagined "dream house" in their place of origin, bringing into view the Italian concept of *sistemazione*, a term also discussed in studies of Italian migration to Australia (Baldassar, 2001; Pulvirenti, 1996, 2000). In respondents' explanations, *sistemazione* referred in practical terms to a stable family life, a house, and secure employment (typically for the husband). This interpretation resonates with Baldassar's (2001) discussion of *sistemazione* as oriented toward "back home." Baldassar (2001:56) also notes that, for long-term Veneto migrants abroad, remaining overseas could be justified only if one could establish a *sistemazione* abroad that exceeded what could realistically be achieved in the hometown.

For participants in this study, such "superiority" was most often expressed through self-employment or well-paid work for the breadwinner, alongside improved opportunities in Australia for their children. These perceived advantages were frequently cited as a key reason for staying in Australia rather than returning to Italy. Respondents further linked *sistemazione* in Australia to the construction of their current (and often described as final) Brisbane house. Building this house followed their decision to settle permanently, and the dwelling came to stand as the visible, material sign of *sistemazione* achieved in the host country. In this way, an Italian cultural concept provided the symbolic lens through which the meaning of the Brisbane home was articulated.

Respondents commonly explained that they left their hometowns for Australia in order to work, often imagining that they would work intensely for a limited period and then return to Italy. Within these accounts, "working hard" meant sustained and physically demanding labour, frequently across multiple jobs, pursued with the explicit purpose of reaching a life goal. These recollections not only hint at social class positioning, but also reflect the economic and historical conditions in Queensland during respondents' working years. Over the past five decades, Queensland has experienced strong population growth driven by immigration and internal migration, with expansion across many industrial sectors (Ellis and Christine, 2010). Between the 1950s and the 1990s—the period during which many respondents were active in the workforce—this economic growth translated into relatively broad access to paid work, especially in agriculture and service-related occupations (including construction, food service, cleaning, repairs, and dressmaking).

Respondents described taking up opportunities compatible with their skills and working with sustained intensity. Two influences were repeatedly implied in their narratives. The first was the moral value attached to hard work learned in Italy during childhood. Many grew up during the Second World War in peasant households where fathers and grandfathers were *mezzadri* (sharecroppers), and they learned early that survival depended on long hours of manual labour. Schooling was typically limited to compulsory years, and the discipline of arduous work became foundational to their lives both in Italy and later in Australia. The second influence was the post-war Italian context they left behind, which respondents described as marked by scarcity, enforced idleness, and limited prospects. Australia, in contrast, was remembered as a place of opportunity. Arriving with little material security but with youth, energy, and hope, respondents viewed hard work as the means to build a different future. Many emphasized that they worked not for the short period initially imagined, but for decades, often expressing gratitude toward the host country for enabling that transformation.

Through this sustained labour, respondents accumulated sufficient resources to construct their present Brisbane homes. These dwellings therefore came to symbolize the long-term manual effort invested in Australia, while also carrying echoes of their social origins, the economic conditions of Queensland during their working

years, the hardship of the Italian post-war period, and the work ethic learned in early life and enacted across adulthood.

Pride in Italian culture was also expressed through the home, yet respondents suggested that such pride was not always comfortably received within Australian society, particularly in earlier decades. Experiences of intolerance were recalled as producing shame and humiliation that, in turn, shaped the meanings attached to their houses in Brisbane. To contextualize these feelings, respondents' narratives were read against the political climate of the periods they lived through.

Negative sentiment toward migrants resurfaced in the 1950s alongside a large post-war migration program that brought many new arrivals, including Italians, to Australia (Douglass, 1995). The program aimed to expand the labour force for industrial development and to increase population in the context of low birth rates and ambitious demographic targets (Jordens, 1995; Jupp, 1996; Murphy, 1993). At the time, native-born Australians were often reassured that most migrants would be British, thereby sustaining the idea of a "white Australia" (Castels et al., 1988). When British migration did not meet expectations, recruitment shifted toward Northern European and Mediterranean populations, accompanied by propaganda that emphasized rapid assimilation (Murphy, 1993). Respondents arrived during what has been described as the Assimilationist period (1947–1963), when migrants were expected to relinquish prior cultural practices in order to fit into an Anglo-Celtic norm (Jordens, 1995; Jupp, 1996; Murphy, 1993). A frequently cited example of the attitude of the time appears in a 1950 feature in *The Sun-Herald*: "What we want is for these migrants to become absorbed into the Australian community, not to bring their own habits with them" (quoted in Hage, 1997:113).

Respondents then lived through the Integration period (1964–1972), marked by the gradual dismantling of the White Australia policy while maintaining a strong emphasis on the "Australian way of life," continued migration, and cautious acceptance of cultural difference. They also experienced the subsequent Multicultural period (1973–present), commonly described as redefining national identity in more explicitly diverse terms (Jordens, 1995; Jupp, 1996; Murphy, 1993). Respondents generally described multiculturalism as a time of stronger public celebration of diversity and cultural pluralism, and many noted that conditions for migrants improved considerably and continued to improve.

These reflections point to a psychological movement in respondents' accounts—from early experiences of shame and humiliation toward a more confident pride in Italian identity—shaped by shifting political climates. In many narratives, pride was explicitly tied to the home and to external aesthetic choices made during construction. The resulting houses can be read as material expressions of pride in Italian architectural culture, while still carrying faint traces of earlier negative experiences that had once constrained how openly difference could be displayed.

When describing what their Brisbane homes meant, some respondents used explicitly symbolic language. One compared the house to a "nest" for the family: a comfortable place where relatives could always return for food, rest, and welcome. Another referred to the home as a "headquarters." Such metaphors evoke well-known interpretations of home as shelter (Sommerville, 1992) or as a refuge from the outside world (Després, 1991), supporting aspects of existing literature.

However, respondents' narratives repeatedly returned, often indirectly, to a deeper social dimension: family. Many spoke at length about family members, family activities, and the size and continuity of their kin networks, emphasizing both Italian and Australian branches. This aligns with scholarship that sometimes equates home with family (Mallett, 2004), while also resonating with perspectives that understand home as more expansive than the household as such (Blunt and Dowling, 2006). In the present study, respondents did not primarily define home through the family of origin (parents and siblings in the hometown), but through the nuclear family (the respondents as parents and, where relevant, children living at home) and the extended family (children and their families). This social sphere parallels Becker's (2003) framing of home as

encompassing both nuclear and extended relations.

Starting from this social emphasis, the analysis returns to the house itself to examine socio-spatial relations and emotions tied to specific interior settings, particularly the living room and kitchen. Many respondents identified the more informal ground-floor living area, along with the downstairs kitchen, as the preferred gathering space: warmer, more private, and less formal than the upstairs living room. Because family reunions and everyday interactions concentrated in these spaces, the Brisbane house for some respondents acquired the meaning of a focal point through which family unity could be sustained. In this sense, the sociocultural meaning of home became more layered than the initial framing of the house merely as shelter or refuge.

For all respondents, the present Brisbane home was strongly associated with security, understood in both physical and financial terms. Given the hazards that can threaten houses and, by extension, family wellbeing in Queensland, respondents often linked the idea of home to the assurance provided by a protective structure. While this may appear similar to earlier images of the house as refuge, the emphasis differs. In the discussion of shelter and family, the focus fell on the home as a social haven. Here, attention shifts toward the dwelling as a built structure that produces security through its material resilience.

Most respondents argued that a house should be solidly built—typically in reinforced concrete and brick—in order to withstand environmental threats. This meaning appeared especially frequently in men's accounts, likely reflecting their closer involvement in the building process. For some, security emerged primarily from construction and structural strength; for others, it derived from ownership itself. The certainty of owning the dwelling provided confidence about the future. This second emphasis was particularly common in women's narratives, where the prospect of widowhood and the recognition that women often outlive men made homeownership feel like a stabilizing foundation. In this way, ownership offered peace of mind, especially regarding the basic questions of where to live and how to maintain oneself over time.

CONCLUSION

The findings show that, for this group of Veneto migrants in Brisbane, "home" is not a single location or a simple synonym for the present dwelling. Instead, it is experienced as both "there" and "here": a multi-scalar and pluri-local construct anchored in the hometown in Italy while also rooted in the current house in Australia. This dual orientation was evident in respondents' immediate impulse to clarify whether "home" referred to their village of origin or to the Brisbane house, suggesting that the emotional and symbolic primacy of place-of-origin persists even after decades abroad, sustained by enduring kinship ties and contemporary communication.

At the same time, participants' narratives drew a clear boundary around what counts as home within Australia. Earlier dwellings—particularly rentals and even some first owned properties—were largely excluded from the category of home and described as provisional, not truly "theirs," or merely instrumental economic steps. The scarcity of photographs, the silence and reluctance to discuss those early houses, and the framing of them as non-final arrangements collectively point to emotional detachment from these spaces. In contrast, the current Brisbane house was repeatedly narrated as the definitive material outcome of permanent settlement. Crucially, respondents interpreted the meaning of the present house through culturally specific moral and symbolic frameworks, especially the concept of *sistemazione*. The home in Brisbane was not described as an arbitrary consumer choice but as a physical manifestation of having "settled" properly—through stable work, family formation, and the achievement of a secure future. In this sense, the built form stands as an embodied proof of success, made possible by decades of sustained labour that respondents remembered as intense, physically demanding, and prolonged far beyond their initial plans. The house thus condenses a life history that includes rural and wartime hardship in Italy, post-war economic scarcity, and the perceived opportunities

of Queensland's expanding economy, with the dwelling becoming the "fruit of toil" and a durable marker of social mobility.

The houses also functioned as cultural statements. Respondents' pride in Italian identity was materially expressed through aesthetic choices, yet this pride was shaped by historical experience: early encounters with assimilationist attitudes produced humiliation and shame that lingered as a shadow behind later confidence. As Australian policy and public discourse moved from assimilation to integration and then multiculturalism, respondents described a gradual psychological shift from concealment to more open affirmation of cultural difference. The home became an especially important arena for this affirmation, offering a controllable space where heritage could be expressed even when the wider social environment was not always welcoming. Finally, the Brisbane home emerged as a key social anchor. Beyond its role as shelter, it operated as a point of reference for sustaining family unity, especially through everyday practices and gatherings concentrated in the living room and kitchen. Alongside this relational meaning, the house also symbolized security in two complementary ways: as a solid structure capable of withstanding perceived local hazards, and as an owned asset that provided financial and existential reassurance, particularly in relation to ageing and concerns about the future. Taken together, these findings demonstrate that the migrants' houses are not merely functional dwellings but culturally and emotionally dense artifacts through which settlement, work, identity, family, and security are materially organized and continually reaffirmed.

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